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ABSTRACT

Literature students can benefit by reading drama from an actor's perspective, using selected principles taken from Constantin Stanislavski's approach to acting commonly known as "the method." Susan Glaspell's one-act play "Trifles" accommodates itself well to Stanislavski's approach, which is based upon a play's "super-objective" or theme. Closely related to the super-objective is the "through-line," the primary objective or "spine" of each character that carries him or her towards a basic goal. Discussing super-objectives, through-lines, and labeling key incidents in the play, students can explore the significance of each incident and position the characters in relationship to the events. Such an exercise can also provide opportunities for students to revise their earlier reading of the text. Students can also discuss stage directions to help readers visualize the actions that the subtext had shaped. Stanislavski's "magic if" (what would the actor as the character do if...?) led students to demonstrate (in writing assignments) keen insights into the characters' motivations and their attitudes towards both themselves and others. Stanislavski's approach, helping readers to account for a playtext's central interest and the complexities of its characters, coaxes "what is not there" from the reader's imagination. (Contains 14 references.) (RS)

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Joanne Brown

STANISLAVSKI IN THE LITERATURE CLASSROOM: READING DRAMA FROM AN ACTOR'S PERSPECTIVE

Although drama is often part of the literature curriculum, most students have little experience with the genre. They find that reading a playtext is considerably more difficult and less pleasurable than reading fiction, with which they are more familiar. How should they respond to a text that lacks regular paragraphs, that provides no authorial voice between the lines of dialogue, no descriptive passages, no overt transitions? To complicate the problem, teachers, too, who usually have developed a critical framework and vocabulary through work with other kinds of texts, are often uncertain of how to approach a playtext in a critically meaningful way.

As a former acting teacher, I have found that my literature students have benefitted from reading drama from an actor's perspective, using selected principles taken from Constantin Stanislavski's approach to acting commonly known as "the method." This approach has provided a means of inquiry into both the playtext itself and the complicated tensions and emotions that lie beneath it. In particular, it has enabled students to construct complex and insightful readings of characters' motivations and the characters' relationships with each other.

In this paper, I will discuss some of the constraints of drama that create difficulties for readers. I will then explain selected principles from Stanislavski's approach and demonstrate how some of my students adapted his "method" of inquiry to construct a reading of Susan Glaspell's one-act play Trifles.

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Interpretive Difficulties of Drama

In contrast to fiction, drama is not usually written for solitary readers; rather, it is intended for a watching and listening audience. As such, a playtext is a pre-text for a later performance, less a finished product than a starting point, no more the eventual play than the score is the symphony. Unlike fiction, it depends upon the collaborative, interpretive efforts of others--performers, directors, designers--to mediate between it and its eventual audience.

Because a playtext is intended primarily for performance, playwrights are limited to those elements that an audience can hear and see: dialogue and movement. Unlike fiction writers, they must limit their authorial observations about what their characters are thinking and feeling to prefatory comments or brief parenthetical remarks. A comparison between a passage from Henry James' novel Washington Square and its dramatic adaptation The Heiress illustrates this point.

Catherine Sloper, the shy daughter of wealthy, sardonic Dr. Austin Sloper, is being courted by Morris Townsend, whom her father accurately perceives as a fortune hunter. When the doctor presses Catherine to promise that she will not marry Townsend, she resists. James describes that moment with a careful account of Catherine's motives:

> The Doctor was silent a minute. "I ask you for a particular reason. I am altering my will."
>
> This reason failed to strike Catherine; and indeed

> she scarcely understood it. All her feelings were merged in the sense that he was trying to treat her as he had treated her years before. She had suffered from it then; and now all her experience, all her acquired tranquility and rigidity protested. She had been so humble in her youth that she could now afford to have a little pride, and there was something in this request, and in her father's thinking himself so free to make it, that seemed an injury to her dignity. Poor Catherine's dignity was not aggressive; it never sat in state; but if you pushed far enough you could find it. Her father had pushed very far.
>
> "I can't promise," she simply repeated. (272)

Here is this same moment in The Heiress:

> Catherine: I won't promise.
>
> Dr. Sloper: Please explain, then!
>
> Catherine: I can't explain, and won't promise.
>
> Dr. Sloper: Then I must alter my will!
>
> Catherine: You should. You should do it immediately.
>
> Dr. Sloper: I will do it when I please.
>
> Catherine: That is very wrong of you. You should do it now, while you can. (Goetz 78)

The dramatic version necessarily omits the authorial explanation, and an actor playing Catherine must construct her own reading of the character's motives. Readers (and in the early stages of rehearsals, actors, too, are readers) must do likewise. Thus, much

of the meaning of a drama lies in what is known as the subtext, the unstated complexities implied but not directly expressed by the text itself. To respond fully to a playtext, one must read--literally--between the lines.

This is not, of course, to imply that the "meaning" of novels and short stories presents itself gratuitously to readers or that it is somehow fixed upon the page. The work of literary and reading theorists such as Louise M. Rosenblatt and Wolfgang Iser has demonstrated that the meaning of a text is not fossilized within the text itself, waiting to be discovered or mined, but grows out of the interaction between reader and text, through what Rosenblatt calls the "transaction" between the two, shaped by circumstances in the reader's life while constrained by the text itself (17-21). Thus constructed, the meaning of a text may vary significantly from one reader to another, just as the sometimes startling contrasts between two productions of the same drama may evidence a range of interpretations for a single text.

In fiction as well as drama, readers must provide for what Wolfgang Iser has called "gaps" or "blanks" in the narrative structure, the spaces between the main perspectives or segments of a text that readers fill from their "wandering viewpoint" as they move through it, linking earlier segments to later ones and using the gaps or blanks to revise their readings as they make new discoveries during their textual journey (167-169).

A playtext, one can argue, represents a heightened instance of a text with gaps, and many students, bringing to the dramatic text

the readerly expectations they have used to engage with fiction, may find those gaps inscrutable. Unable to respond fully to the text itself, the meaning of whose dialogue may depend heavily on vocal shadings and physical movement, and unaware of the subtextual currents beneath it, they see the narrative as skeletal, the characters flat and uninteresting. As the work of such theorists as Peter Rabinowitz has demonstrated, reading is a "learned, conventional activity. In other words, literary conventions are not in the text waiting to be uncovered, but in fact precede the text" (27) and make interpretation possible.

Stanislavski's approach has proven its value in helping actors fill the blanks of a particular role; it can also help readers respond more fully to a text as a whole, setting them up to interact with a playtext and engage with it more fully.

Stanislavski's "Method"

Constantin Stanislavski directed the Moscow Art Theater in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, just as theatrical "realism" was taking root. He developed a system for encouraging actors to identify with or "live" their roles, reasoning that if actors believed in the stage reality, they would respond realistically, in ways that the audience would find believable or credible. His revolutionary approach rejected the then popular external approach that depended heavily on artifice and theatrics--vocal bombast and exaggerated movement--to thrust the actor into the spirit of a role.

Much of Stanislavksi's theory, of course, is stage-specific,

related to such concerns as the actor's voice and body. But although his approach is intended for performers, certain of his principles can also be appropriate for readers, especially his approach to textual analysis, providing terms that are drama-specific and allowing readers to understand a playtext and its characters from an actor's perspective and as a pre-text for an eventual performance. Evolving as it did from his work with Russian realism, it provides a particularly effective means of critical inquiry into realistic drama.

Reading Trifles from a Stanislavskian Perspective

Susan Glaspell's one-act play Trifles accommodates itself well to Stanislavski's approach. Written in 1916, it is a realistic drama with characters whose motivations are both complex and accessible, and its subtext invites interaction with readers. The drama is set in the farm kitchen of Minnie Wright, who has been jailed the previous day for murdering her husband, a charge she denies. A county attorney, a sheriff, and a neighboring farmer have come to the Wright's home to search for clues to Minnie's motive, particularly "something to show anger, or--sudden feeling" (1120). The sheriff and neighbor are accompanied by their wives, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale, who have come to collect a few items of clothing for Minnie.

After the men have gone upstairs to look around, leaving the women in the kitchen, Mrs. Hale finds in Minnie's quilting basket a quilt patch whose irregular stitches reveal extreme agitation. A few minutes later the women discover the body of Minnie's canary

in a box among the pieces of material, its neck broken. They surmise that Minnie's husband, described by Mrs. Hale as "a hard man. . . Like a raw wind that gets to the bone," has wrung the bird's neck (just as, we learn, he earlier silenced Minnie's singing) and that Minnie, isolated and desperate, has strangled her husband. Although the opening scene positions the men as clearly in control of both the investigation and the women, by the end of the play the two women have thwarted the investigation by concealing the dead bird, their empathy for Minnie's circumstances aligning them with her and each other against their husbands and the law.

The play takes its title from a line spoken by Mrs. Hale's husband: "Women are used to worrying about trifles," he says (1117), deriding the women's concern with domestic matters. The men are particularly amused by Mrs. Hale's speculation about whether Minnie intended to quilt or knot her quilt, little suspecting that the "trifles" of Minnie's quilting basket contain precisely the clues for which they are searching.

I have sometimes included Trifles as part of a freshman seminar in reading and writing, in a sequence on "Ways of Reading" designed to help students become aware of the many factors that contribute to their making of textual "meaning." Trifles serves well in this context; as Laura Quinn has pointed out, students initially reduce Trifles to either a whodunit or an obsolete statement on women's rights (189), overlooking the many complexities that shape their latter readings.

Although Quinn and others have constructed a complex, feminist interpretation of the story,[1] their readings focus mainly on the "separate, gendered spheres of activity and attitude as social phenomena" dramatized in the play (Quinn 192) and on Minnie's story as "nothing less than the story of men's systematic, institutionalized, and culturally approved violence toward women, and of women's potential for retaliatory violence against men" (Fetterly 153).

These readings account for much in the text, but they neglect important differences among the characters, representing them primarily as "men" and "women"; used as a critical lens, gender may blur differences among the same gender even as it reveals similarities. If we open the text to a Stanislavskian analysis, we can understand the characters not only as men and women enacting the gendered nature of social power but as individuals motivated by separate and sometimes conflicting concerns.

The super-objective. Stanislavski's analysis of a drama is based upon what he calls its "super-objective." He uses the term interchangeably with "theme"; however, his concept of theme is more closely tied to the primary motivation of the central character than the traditional definition allows.[2]

When I have asked students to propose a super-objective for Trifles, they often look initially to Minnie's crime ("Minnie wants an eye for an eye") or the men's investigation ("The men wants to solve the crime"). This leads to a discussion of what is at the center of Trifles. Whose story is this? In considering this

question, readers come to see that Trifles is neither Minnie's story or the men's: although Minnie's presence hovers over the drama, she never appears, and with the murder "solved" halfway through the play, interest in the investigation itself wanes. Usually, in trying to articulate a super-objective that accounts for the power of the final scenes, at least one group of students concludes that it is not the investigation itself but the women's responses to it that create the most interest.

At this point, students tend to see the super-objective in obvious terms ("Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters want to protect Minnie"). But after they consider the women's separate motives, they usually see the super-objective in more complex terms. As one student said, "Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters want to affirm their bond with Minnie and each other in order to see justice done."

The through line of action. Closely related to the super-objective is the "through-line," the primary objective or "spine" of each character that carries him or her towards a basic goal. If a production is to succeed, Stanislavski said, "the stream of individual, minor objectives, all the imaginative thoughts, feelings, and actions of an actor, should converge to carry out the super-objective" (256). The through line is expressed as an active verb, perhaps as a specific instance of a more general super-objective or as a "rebellion against the principal theme" (Stanislavski 263). A character's motivation in each scene derives from his or her through line.

Because the goals of the male and female characters in Trifles

are oppositional, it is easy to categorize them as two undifferentiated groups--the men want to convict Minnie whereas the women want to protect her. Yet much of the power of the play derives from tensions within the two groups, particularly between the women. As my students have explored the through line for each woman, they construct readings that allow for the separate routes by which Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters ultimately arrive at their common destination, finding that their respective purposes often conflict.

From the beginning Mrs. Hale is, as the county attorney observes, "loyal to [her] sex" (1118), readily allying herself with Minnie, whom she remembers as a spirited young girl fond of singing and pretty clothes. She voices her opinions openly, defending Minnie's housekeeping to the county attorney with a sharp reprimand for the men: "Those towels get dirty awful quick. Men's hands aren't always as clean as they might be" (1118). She is uncomfortable with the male code of justice, critical of their efforts to get Minnie's "own house to turn against her" (1120). Knowing "how things can be--for women" (1124) and feeling guilty for not visiting Minnie more often, Mrs. Hale wants to protect her because she sees in her lonely and repressed plight the plight of all women: "We all go through the same things--it's just a different kind of the same thing" (1124). She can achieve that objective, however, only if Mrs. Peters does not reveal the body of the dead bird to her husband, the sheriff. One can argue, then, as some of my students have, that Mrs. Hale's through line is to

protect Minnie by enlisting Mrs. Peters' cooperation.

As the sheriff's wife, however, Mrs. Peters is not easily recruited. The county attorney comments that Mrs. Peters is "married to the law," and although she says she hadn't thought of herself in "just that way" (1125), she tries to observe the conventions of her wifely role with wary prudence. Despite her growing empathy with Minnie, she defends what the men are doing because "it's no more than their duty" (1118) and the "law has got punish crime" (1124).

Exploring Mrs. Peters' through line reveals her as the drama's most conflicted and therefore most interesting character: if she befriends Minnie as her sympathies dictate, she must betray her husband and the social order of the world as she knows it. Thus, she wants to protect Minnie while also protecting herself from the profound implications of her betrayal, and her ultimate change of heart constitutes the central tension of Trifles.

Labeling. So that his actors could understand a dramatic text from a shared perspective, Stanislavski instructed them to agree upon carefully selected terms for all of the incidents in it, each so characteristic that it expressed precisely the essence of the event it designates. The actors were then to determine their own reactions to these events and shape their actions accordingly.

Labeling key incidents in Trifles helped my students to explore the significance of each and position the characters in relationship to the events; the exercise also provided strong opportunities for revising their earlier readings of the text. For

example, a key incident occurs when the women find the empty bird cage and, moments later, the dead bird, its neck "all-other side to" (1123). They know immediately, without admitting it aloud to each other, that they have stumbled upon evidence of Minnie's motive. Initially, students described the incident in terms of the bird itself: "a terrible discovery," "the missing clue," "John Wright's 'crime.'"

In the next incident, the men return; the women, silent about what they have found, fabricate a story about a cat to explain the empty bird cage. When students reconsidered the first incident in the light of what follows and in the context of the super-objective, they revised their terms to reflect the women's central position in the drama and the turning point in Mrs. Peters' development that the discovery of the bird marks: "Prelude to a lie," "The truth about 'good' men."

Subtext, motivation, and action. A playwright may specify some movement and gesture, but usually leaves most action to the actors' inventiveness. Indeed, creating action is a significant part of the actor's job; as speech communication experts have shown, people communicate their feelings in large part not through words but by nonverbal signals.

Actors find much of their motivation for action in what they construct as the subtext. Stanislavski helped his actors to explore the subtext through improvisations. Roslyn Arnold has suggested a method of "sub-texting" for readers; working in groups, students read a segment of the original text, enough lines at a

time to make sense of a sequence, "then, in the first person, as if they were the character in the play . . . read the lines again giving as free a translation as possible of the lines in question" (221).[3] By comparing their ideas about the subtext, readers can gain insights into the characters' motivations and their relationships with each other.

When my students "translated" the subtext of Trifles, they often discovered a tangle of emotions beneath what at first seemed a self-evident exchange. One such moment is the scene in which Mrs. Hale comes upon the quilt block with its stitches "all over the place" (1121). Her immediate objective is to destroy the evidence. Mrs. Peters' objective is more ambiguous. The subtext below, by one group of students who chose to use the rural dialect of the original text, represents Mrs. Peters, once she fails to stop Mrs. Hale, as trying to hurry Mrs. Hale along while denying to herself that the haphazard sewing has any significance. It brings forward the women's separate motives and their relationship with each other. The scene begins after Mrs. Hale has ripped out the tell-tale stitches.

Original text:	Subtext:
Mrs. Peters: Oh, what are you doing, Mrs. Hale?	Mrs. P.: Don't mess with Minne's things, Mrs. Hale. What if the men walk in and see you?
Mrs. Hale: (Mildly) Just pulling out a stitch or two that's not sewed very good. (Threading the needle) Bad sewing always made me fidgety.	Mrs. H.: Calm down. I'm only fixing a few stitches. (Threading the needle) Let's just pretend it's those stitches that trouble me, not what they might mean.

Mrs. P.: (Nervously) I don't think we ought to touch things.

Mrs. H.: I'll just finish this end. (Suddenly stopping and leaning forward) Mrs. Peters?

Mrs. P.: Yes, Mrs. Hale?

Mrs. H.: What do you suppose she was so nervous about?

Mrs. P.: Oh--I don't know. I don't know as she was nervous. I sometimes sew awful queer when I'm tired.

Mrs. P.: You shouldn't be messing with anything. Please put that sewing down before anyone sees.

Mrs. H.: Don't worry, I'm almost done. (Suddenly stopping and leaning forward) I got something to ask you.

Mrs. P.: What do you want now?

Mrs. H.: What do you make of them crooked stitches?

Mrs. P.: I don't think we ought to talk about this. You're acting as if you think Minnie did it. A few crooked stitches on a quilt patch don't amount to a pile of corn shucks.

It has been said that audiences come to the theater to see not the playtext (which they could read at home) but the subtext. One of the actor's challenges, once he understands the subtext, is to dramatize it for an audience, much of it through physical action.

Stanislavski formulated three questions to help actors create believable actions: What do I do? Why do I do it? How do I do it? Perhaps an actor looks out the window upon entering the room (the <u>what</u>), prompted by his character's suspicion that he has been followed (the <u>why</u>). Not wanting to be seen by anyone looking in, he stays to one side of the window, flattened against the wall (the <u>how</u>).

My students agreed that in the scene above, the women can express much of the subtext through what they do. The stage directions indicate that both women are already seated at the kitchen table when the above dialogue begins. One group imagined

that as Mrs. Peters asks, "what are you doing?" she reaches towards Mrs. Hale (the what) to prevent her from ripping out the stitches (the why); the group saw the gesture as tentative, indicative of her uncertain loyalties and lack of confidence, so that she withdraws her hand almost immediately (the how). Another group saw Mrs. Peters as drawing back a little, timid about making any overt gesture to stop Mrs. Hale, but indicating her disapproval by shaking her head and physically separating herself from any complicity.

When Mrs. Hale answers in the next line ("Just pulling out a stitch or two that's not sewed very good"), both groups thought she should turn away (the what). They felt that because her excuse is flimsy (it is not the "bad" sewing but the circumstances that make her nervous), she turns to avoid looking at Mrs. Peters and to keep the sewing out of her reach (the why), shifting only slightly (the how) so that her movement is casual and does not alarm Mrs. Peters further. Some students pointed out that if Mrs. Hale turns away on her first line, she might turn back when she says, "Mrs. Peters?" The turning back would visually realign her with the other woman and emphasize the furtive nature of their growing bond. The point of the discussion, of course, was not to argue for one set of stage directions or another, but to help readers visualize the actions that the subtext had shaped.

<u>The magic if</u>. Stanislavski proposed what he called "the magic if" to transform the character's objective into the actor's: What would I as the character do if...? <u>If</u> carries both actors and

readers into the imaginary circumstances of the play without forcing them to believe that they are anyone but themselves, allowing them to respond in the context of their own lives. If is a supposition. It asserts nothing but can serve as a powerful stimulus to imagination and thought.

When I posed "magic if" questions about Trifles, the students' responses demonstrated keen insights into the characters' motivations and their attitudes towards both themselves and others. In the final moments of the drama, for example, the women are alone in the kitchen; on the kitchen table is Minnie's sewing basket with the dead bird in it:

> (Then Mrs. Hale rises, hands tight together, looking intensely at Mrs. Peters, whose eyes make a slow turn, finally meeting Mrs. Hale's. A moment Mrs. Hale holds her, then her own eyes point the way to where the box is concealed. Suddenly Mrs. Peters throws back quilt pieces and tries to put the box in the bag she is wearing. It is too big. She opens box, starts to take bird out, cannot touch it, goes to pieces, stands there helpless. Sound of a knob turning in the other room. Mrs. Hale snatches the box and puts it in the pocket of her big coat. Enter County Attorney and Sheriff.) (1125)

I asked students to write briefly about what they would do if they were Mrs. Hale and the men returned as she was trying to hide the bird in her pocket. How would they respond if asked to explain

her actions? Most of their replies highlighted Mrs. Hale's strength and determination. One credited her with considerable bravado:

> I would probably be very worried for both myself and Minnie, but I wouldn't let on. I might think of an excuse for what I was doing, like saying the bird died because it was left alone in the house and I was going to take it home and bury it. I think I could talk my way out of it. Those men weren't as smart as they thought they were.

Another gave Mrs. Hale the benefit of a contemporary perspective:

> I probably wouldn't try to lie. Instead, I'd tell the men that I had evidence that John Wright had abused his wife and that I was going to make sure that Minnie had a good attorney. Then I'd want to appear in court as a witness and teach them a few things about domestic violence. (I know that women couldn't do such things back then. Reading this play helped me appreciate the importance of women's rights.)

When I asked the students to write about how they might respond under the same circumstances if they were Mrs. Peters, their answers distinguished sharply between the two women, reflecting the tenuous nature of Mrs. Peters' cooperation and the difficulty of her position. One wrote:

> I would probably be hysterical, especially because the dead bird would be so gross and I would be terrified of

> the whole situation. I might want to look at Mrs. Hale for help, but I'd be too afraid. I'd want Mr. Peters to forgive me. Deep inside, I'd know that my life would never be the same because the story would get around and I'd lose everyone's trust and respect.

Another saw Mrs. Peters as more concerned with the immediate moment:

> I would try not to cry or say anything. But if Mr. Peters started asking questions of me, like "Did you find the bird in this room?" or "Were you trying to hide it from me?" I would break down and tell the truth by nodding my head.

A third thought that Mrs. Peters would capitulate even further:

> I'd want to confess the whole thing, but I'd probably be afraid to, not so much for what might happen to Minnie (although I'd worry about it) but for what would happen to me. Once I started talking, though, I might try to put some of the blame on Mrs. Hale. The whole thing was really her idea.

Several students commented that until the "magic if" exercise, they had understood Mrs. Peters' "going to pieces" only as revulsion at the dead bird, not as terror over being caught by the men. They revised their reading of that moment to account for both motives.

Conclusion

A good playwright, as Virginia Woolf said of Jane Austin, "stimulates us to supply what is not there" (174). But for most

students, inexperienced at reading drama and unable to attend a performance of most playtexts they study, "what is not there" may prove elusive. However, students can learn to imagine a mental "production" complete with dramatized subtext, to understand the playtext not as a sketchy, inferior variation of fiction but as a narrative that is engaging and satisfying on its own terms. Stanislavski's approach, helping readers to account for a playtext's central interest and the complexities of its characters, coaxes "what is not there" from where it has always lurked--in the reader's imagination.

ENDNOTES

[1] Laura Quinn has written about gendered responses to Trifles; Fetterly uses "A Jury of Her Peers," a short story by Glaspell based on the play, to explore some of the same issues; C. W. E. Bigsby discusses the role of women in the social world constructed by the play.

[2] Stanislavski linked the super-objective to what he understood as the author's intent, but contemporary readers, of course, need not be so constrained.

[3] Although Arnold uses this approach to initiate discussion of a text, I find my students' responses more insightful if we delay the exercise until after we have discussed the super-objective and the through lines of the major characters.

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